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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002974

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SUBJECT: SITUATION IN DELTA CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The situation in the Niger Delta continues to deteriorate, with attacks on installations, kidnappings, banditry, and oil bunkering all on the rise. Violence also appears to be being exacerbated by rivalries within the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) over control of the lucrative illegal activities in the region. The situation is likely to get worse as the 2007 elections approach and the various players resort to the high stakes game of winner take all for control over the vast and lucrative market of official and unofficial spoils.

THINGS ARE GETTING WORSE

12. (U) Sources from the Niger Delta have indicated to Poloff that the situation has been exacerbated by the intense intra-group struggle within the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the main body for militants. There are now many militant groups in the area and their interests range from political to financial. Sources claimed that there are some militants who are also into bunkering with the help of local businessmen, politicians and expatriates (Chinese were specifically mentioned) who supply arms to these militants in exchange for oil. The same sources expressed concerns about the volume and quality of arms in the possession of these youths and feared that there might be unprecedented violence in the Niger Delta area as we move towards the 2007 elections.

13. (U) The high-profile activities, including attacks on residential compounds and hostage-taking, mask the constant occurrences of armed confrontation and petty crime throughout the region. These activities continue despite ubiquitous roadblocks mounted by police, military and other security agencies.

14. (C) Sporadic and rather weak efforts by the Nigerian government over the years to make the Niger Delta area free of violence by getting rid of militant groups have proven ineffective. There has rather been an increase both in the number of militant groups and the scale of violence owing largely to the volume of arms in circulation in the area. Sources further claimed the detention of one of the militant leaders, Dokubo Asari, has further increased the volatility of the situation. The attitude of the politicians in the

region is compounding the problem as some of them had reportedly armed a lot of youths prior to the 2003 elections to help rig elections and these arms are still in the possession of these jobless thugs, some of whom are alleged to have received "guerilla-warfare-type" training sponsored by these politicians.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

15. (U) In a bid to stem the tide of violence in the area, the federal government has explored various options ranging from setting up military task forces to take over the security surveillance of the area to setting up the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the recently introduced Presidential Forum on Niger Delta aimed at initiating projects that will ensure the provision of basic infrastructure in the area and raise the standard of living of the predominantly riverine communities. These initiatives have not yielded any reasonable results as violence has continued undeterred.

16. (S) According to a source in the Presidency, President Obasanjo and Governor of Rivers State Peter Odili have agreed that something needs to be done. The source claims that Odili had planned to hold a "secret" meeting with all heads of militant groups around November 6 to get agreement on a cease fire to enable Odili to pursue his presidential ambitions. The source says that Obasanjo's advisors know nothing of this plan, but that it involves offering large sums of money to each individual militant leader in an effort to buy six months of freedom for political activities.

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(COMMENT: It is unlikely that Odili, who sponsored many of the groups in his previous election efforts, has the depth of contacts through the area to contact "all" the militants. It is also difficult to imagine how much money might be involved in such a massive effort. END COMMENT.)

17. (C) Nongovernmental efforts to work with the youths at the heart of the problem has had limited success, according to NGO representatives active in the region. One effort described to Poloff by one of its organizers, Judi Asuni, in which militants previously armed are being recruited to insure the viability of the electoral process is limited by scope and geographical area, thereby limiting its potential impact. There are, however, very few serious efforts along these lines, Asuni said.

COMMENT

18. (C) The crisis in the Niger Delta area is largely attributable to the failure of government, at the local, state and national levels, to live up to its social responsibilities to citizens and to deal with the alleged complicity of some members of government in illegal activities. The legacy of these failures is exacerbated by the cycle of violence ushered in by the 2003 elections in which arms were imported and distributed for political purposes. Demobilizing these forces is highly unlikely both given the lucrative nature of illicit activities, and the fact that the people who initially supported the militants now have limited control over their activities. The looming elections in 2007 will only increase the likelihood that the current climate of chaos will prevail, and those who operate in the shadows will continue to profit.

CAMPBELL